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Re-Reading the Familiar with New Eyes: Steven F. Lawson and Black Freedom Struggle Historiography

In this collection of previously published essays, Steven F. Lawson invites readers to follow the trajectory of his foundational scholarship on the black freedom struggle. Perhaps best known for his study of the post-1945 struggle for black political power, this collection includes essays that demonstrate Lawson's flexibility, exploring civil rights agitation and resistance in Florida, and pointing to new research directions. For scholars who have followed Lawson's writings over the past twenty-five years, this collection offers few new insights. However, it makes a valuable contribution to the historiography of the black freedom struggle by demonstrating the progression of the field from a narrow focus on prominent male leaders and national organizations to a wider lens that includes local studies and extends the movement chronology beyond 1968.

The collection opens with Lawson's updated historiographical essay, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement." First published in 1991, this valuable review continues to offer useful insights into the trajectory of civil rights historiography from the early studies of the late 1960s and 1970s to more recent work. Lawson's update brings the piece to the present, highlighting current topics in civil rights scholarship including community studies, explorations of women's leadership, and studies that situate the largely national narrative of the civil rights movement in an international context of cold war propaganda and U.S. foreign policy.

In this essay, Lawson reviews recent scholarly work

to demonstrate the "healthy disagreements" among historians who continue to debate "the focus, scope, and conceptualization of the movement" (p. 28). He applauds scholars' efforts to challenge dichotomies and chronology that have shaped the field until recently. In particular, he highlights studies such as Timothy Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (1999) to demonstrate the long-standing traditions of self-defense that continued to shape the southern movement even after non-violent strategies were employed in Montgomery and Greensboro. Lawson also offers favorable reviews of studies that extend the chronology of the movement beyond the Montgomery-to-Memphis timeline, shifting emphasis to lesser known activists and local communities. While he clearly appreciates these studies, Lawson continues his debate with fellow historian Charles Payne, cautioning against "merely substituting a 'local determinism' for a 'top-down determinism.'" Instead, Lawson echoes his earlier call for a "complicated and multi-dimensional understanding of the civil rights movement" (p. 21).

Throughout parts 2-5, Lawson demonstrates his own efforts to develop this complicated understanding of the movement. Read as a whole, the essays describe the ways in which the black freedom struggle manifests at the federal level, in local and state electoral politics, and in local communities in Florida. However, when read individually, the pieces seem to point to the difficulty in working with the kind of model that Lawson advocates. In parts 2 and 3, Lawson covers the terrain for which he is best known: federal intervention and black electoral politics. In his essays about President Lyndon B. Johnson, he offers a nuanced interpretation of this complex personality. According to Lawson, Johnson surprised both

fellow southern Senators and black civil rights advocates, drawing on his considerable political experience to shepherd landmark civil rights legislation through Congress. However, as Lawson describes, these legislative victories did not reverse poor social and economic conditions for many African Americans who continued to experience discrimination in education, employment and housing. By tracing Johnson's efforts, Lawson clearly demonstrates both the necessity for and limitations of federal legislation in addressing racial discrimination in local communities.

In part 3, Lawson focuses on black electoral politics, using the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as his primary historical reference. In these essays, he argues that the 1965 act set the stage for increased black political power, removing barriers to black enfranchisement and representation in the form of black elected officials. However, as Lawson describes, after the initial dramatic increases in southern black voter registration and the number of black elected officials, the landscape changed, as civil rights leaders emphasized economic power and political conservatives regained control of the White House and Congress. According to Lawson, these shifts diminished the potential influence of increased black electoral power.

The essays demonstrate Lawson's skill at describing and analyzing change over time. They situate current debates about the influence of race within a broader historical context, highlighting moments of progress as well as tracing efforts that erode forward momentum. Drawing on national statistics, he convincingly argues that increased political participation has not translated into better conditions for the majority of African Americans. Adopting a largely top-down perspective, Lawson leaves the reader with a dismal picture of the lasting impact of liberal social reform.

In part 4, Lawson shifts perspective to the local level, offering three essays on civil rights struggles in Florida. Originally published in the early to mid-1980s, the essays extend civil rights historiography to the Sunshine State. Unlike Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama in the 1960s, Florida had become home to a diverse population of "snowbirds," or retirees, and Hispanic immigrants. However, like David Colburn's study of St. Augustine, Lawson demonstrates that "Florida and cities like Tampa were not exceptions within Dixie," rigidly holding on to racial segregation and discriminatory practices (p. xi).[1] In these three essays, Lawson focuses on the interaction between civil rights activists and state and local officials, presenting a multi-dimensional picture of civil rights

struggles in this understudied southern state. Through his careful examination of a post-Scottsboro rape case in Groveland and state-led efforts to restrict NAACP involvement, Lawson shatters the notion that Florida was more "progressive" than other states in the Deep South.

The third essay in this part traces desegregation efforts in Tampa. Through this study, Lawson personalizes the national statistics presented in part 3, describing the shift from nonviolent sit-ins to a race riot as raised aspirations failed to translate into tangible gains for the majority of Tampa's African Americans. Lawson argues that, during the 1960s as cities across the South implemented strategies to desegregate public facilities, Tampa businessmen and government officials successfully employed "a combination of rational persuasion, voluntarism, and gradualism, instead of coercion, repression, and confrontation" (p. 233). This "Tampa Technique" seems to stand in contrast to the level of white resistance described in the previous essays, not to mention Colburn's graphic descriptions of protests in St. Augustine. These distinctions raise additional questions. In what ways are the differences a reflection of local vs. state politics? Were there distinct and important differences between northern, central, and southern Florida? How do these differences shape Florida's history during this period, in contrast to other southern states? More than twenty years after their original publication, Lawson's pioneering essays continue to raise interesting questions and seem to reinforce the need for a book-length examination of the movement in Florida.[2]

In part 5, Lawson points to new directions for civil rights scholarship. While his essay on women in the civil rights movement offers few original insights, the inclusion of this essay reinforces the growing consensus of the importance of women's leadership in the movement, and offers a useful historiographic review of influential works in this area of scholarship. Lawson's essay on the payola scandal in the rock and roll industry during the 1950s represents a newer avenue for historical studies of the movement. Lawson situates the Congressional investigation within the context of both the "culture of investigation" as well as concern about changing race relations (p. 237). This essay connects civil rights historiography with the broader context of the Cold War, fears of communism, and social unrest, offering a broader understanding of the political context for the movement.

While each essay describes the black freedom struggle from a particular perspective, the collection as a whole presents the multi-dimensional, complicated pic-

ture of the movement that Lawson advocates. This volume represents an impressive body of work and will prove useful to scholars as well as undergraduate students.

Notes

[1]. See David R. Colburn, *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

[2]. For examples of statewide studies, see John

Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Steven G. N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

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